

*This week's Wednesday Word will perhaps pluck corn on someone's Sabbath! For some of you, it may cut across much of what you have been taught on being a new creation with the old passing and all things becoming new, but give it a listen and consider what I'm saying. Come now let us reason together (Isaiah 1:8).*

**The Wednesday Word, Nov. 19, 2008: The Gospel and the New Creature in Christ.**

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things have passed away; (2 Corinthians 5: 17)

“A holy man is so far acquainted with the corruption of his own heart that instead of condemning others, he is apt to account them better than himself. The imperfections of a believer's sanctification make him continually depend on Christ for his justification.

John Mason; 1646 -1694

For years, one of the most puzzling verses in the entire New Testament was 2 Corinthians 5: 17, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things have passed away; behold all things are become new.”

At the beginning of my Christian life, however, far from being puzzled by this verse, I thought it was one of the easiest Bible verses to understand. There was nothing complicated about it for it explained the great change which had taken place in my life. I took it to mean what it said----literally. It informed me that now that I was a Christian, I had a brand new life. The old life had gone, a new life had come in and everything was new. And it was true; everything was new. Before being saved I would never have read the Bible, but now I loved it and devoured it. I had hated prayer, except in emergencies, but now I found myself attending all night prayer meetings! I used to love to smoke weed and unlike a former President I did inhale, but when I became a believer the very smell of the stuff made me ill. I used to despise Christians, but now I loved being around them. Old things had passed away: all things were new! It would be safe to say that in many ways I had become transformed.

But as the years passed by I began to be troubled by my life. No it's not that I wanted to start smoking again or become a drunk. Far from it! What began happening was that I started to get confronted by the horror which was still me. I found that I was still capable of thinking and planning all manner of lust and mischief. I also still had a vicious temper...only now it was more imbedded and more under control. Yes, under control, but still there. Troubling! Victory over sin was at times very temporary. It was seasonal at best! And by this time I was preaching----help----and I found that every time I quoted this ‘new creature in Christ’ scripture to my listeners I now felt an unusual sort of hollowness. Quietly I thought, “You are being a hypocrite McKee,” I felt I should be saying, “Some things have passed away and some things have become new, but there's still a lot of the old nonsense remaining!”

Then guest ministers would preach at my church and they would invariably tell us that the old had passed and all things were now new. I would inwardly flinch, but outwardly nod my head with the agreement of the ‘wise and knowing’. And as this line always drew amens of appreciation from

ranks of the hearers, I began to suspect that I was the only one in the church who didn't see this scripture as being true in their lives. Old things passed away and ALL things new? .. Not for me...some things had passed away and some things were new but not ALL THINGS!

Then I discovered Paul! I don't mean I actually discovered him...I'd been reading him for years, but for the first time, I noticed a progression in his life. Actually it was more of a regression than a progression. When I followed his life and writings I found that in AD 56, he wrote to the Corinthians telling them that he was the least of the Apostles (1Corinthians 15:9). Then four years later, in AD 60, he tells the Ephesians that he's the least of all the saints (Ephesians 3:8). Then, four years after that, he tells Timothy that he is the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

Least of the Apostles! ----- Least of all the saints! ----- Chief of sinners! And this is progress? Indeed, he seems to have everything back to front. You see, I thought that when salvation first took a hold of people, they came into the Church feeling as though they were the chief of sinners. After a while, they got their lives cleaned up a little and felt as though they has now graduated to become the least of the saints. Then finally, they got some kind of ministry and became, so to speak, the least of the apostles. Paul seems, however, to be walking in reverse! What was going on here?

There's a famous story back in Ireland about a young man, who when walking to Dublin, stopped and asked how far it was to the city. Twenty miles was the reply. After two more hours of a brisk pace he stopped and asked again how far he was from Dublin and the answer came, 20 miles. After two more hours of vigorous walking, he again stopped and asked how far he was from the great city. Twenty miles was the reply. He sat down in the ditch, scratched his head and said, "Well at least I'm holding my own!"

The poor old Apostle Paul, however, didn't even seem to be holding his own. When we Consider that he's the Apostle who wrote most of our New Testament, it is astonishing to hear him say that he is the least of the Apostles. And it's extraordinary to read that he considers himself the least of all the saints...did the man not know the saints? Did he not know about the Corinthian fornicator and the saints who got drunk at church services? Was he unaware of the two squabbling women in Philippi who kept their assembly in an uproar? Yes Paul knew the saints and ministered to them daily, yet he calls himself the least of all saints. But when I read that he considered himself to be the chief of sinners, quite frankly I was stunned. What had happened to him? Had he lost touch with reality?

What kind of man wrote those verses? What sort of person made these confessions? Was it a new convert? Was it a Christian in a fit of backsliding or depression? Was it a carnal believer? No! Far from it, these were the confessions of a mature, ageing Christian in the last decade of his life. These were the words of one of the finest and greatest Christians ever to have lived. This same man goes on to tell Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2Timothy 4:7).

Therefore, we see these are neither the admissions of someone who has drifted away from the fold nor the declarations of a backslider overcome with sin. These are,----- and get ready for this,-----these are the confessions of a man who is growing closer to God.

The truth is this, the closer we get to God, the more we understand that we are lost without Him. The closer we draw to Him the more we are convinced that salvation is all of grace and grace leaves no room for human merit. The closer we get to God the more we will realize that there is no hope within ourselves. We see there is nothing in us to commend us to the thrice-holy God.

Closeness to God always makes a person feel undone. Consider Abraham! The Lord had just told him He was about to incinerate Sodom and Gomorrah. He'd had enough of their wickedness and now stood ready to vaporize the whole vile mess. Abraham's reply is astonishing: He says, "Lord, I've talked to You and I'm already incinerated." Actually what he said was, "I am dust and ashes" but it's the same thing (Genesis 18:27). Abraham had drawn close to God and had encountered true holiness: as a result, he felt as vile as the people of the doomed cities. He felt the same judgment they were about to get was due to him.

Consider also Job and his miserable comforters. Remember poor Job? He was afflicted with a plague of Sabeans, a plague of Chaldeans, a plague of wicked weather and because of these he lost everything. Then he endured a plague of boils, the plague of a nagging wife and then finally the plague of well meaning friends who just had no clue about what was really happening. These friends argued with the pitiable man that his afflictions must have been a result of sin in his life. He'd been bad to the widows or some such thing they reasoned. But each time they attacked, Job launched a stout and robust defense. After all, he was a God fearing and good man who had walked uprightly. But then God showed up! This changed Job's tune! Check it out in Job 40:4 where Job admits to the Lord, "Behold I am vile". His friends couldn't get him to admit this, but now confronted with the very presence of the Almighty he sees that his own righteousness was non-existent compared to the Lord's.

And then remember Isaiah? He was the great woe preacher of his day. His favorite text was, "Woe unto you". He dealt out woes saying, "Woe unto this one and woe unto that one". But one morning, Isaiah went to the Temple and there he encountered the Lord. The Seraphim were declaring, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory". Isaiah took in the scene and immediately declared, "Woe is me, I am undone". What had happened? The 'woe to this one and to that one' preacher had changed his tune. It was now 'Woe unto me!' What had changed? What was the reason for this outburst? The reason was that nearness to God had made Him feel undone! The truth is, and this may startle you, holy people never feel holy and those who feel holy are never holy people. The closer we get to God the more keenly we are aware of our own depths of depravity.

The closer we get to God the more we discover that sin is a much bigger issue that we first thought. At the start, for me, it was just a matter of cleaning up the external actions, but now, as the Holy Spirit led I could see that sin ran like a deep cancer. I love the quote from Mason at the beginning of this piece—it's worth reading again. "A holy man is so far acquainted with the corruption of his own heart that instead of condemning others, he is apt to account them better than himself. The imperfections of a believer's sanctification make him continually depend on Christ for his justification." I have found this truth to be very real. I am so sinful that sometime I don't even realize that I'm sinful. Even the act of preaching can be a time of gross and vile sinfulness for me. You see, many times I find myself in competition with the Lord Jesus for who gets the glory in the

sermon. Will it be Jesus or me? This has been a huge struggle! The difficulty is, my orphaned heart wants everyone to like me and wants them to think I am a great preacher. Not being satisfied with the acceptance of Christ alone I crave the applause of strangers. That, my friend is refusal to believe the gospel---it is wickedness of the highest order. In addition, how dare I use the Lord's pulpit and the Lord's message to carve out my own fan club! So what if my listeners like me? Am I here to glorify the Lord or myself? ...And then the Holy Spirit reminds me that if I seek to please men I am not the servant of Christ! And thus the struggle with sin intensifies and all the more so as I grow closer to the Lord.

So where does this leave the scripture, If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things have passed away; behold all things are become new? Why it leaves it exactly where it should be! But is it true? Yes it's precisely true! But what does it mean? It means exactly what it says! But clear up the mystery. There is no mystery! It says; if any man be "IN CHRIST"...that's the key, that's where the new creation lies! It is only in Christ that the old has passed away and ALL has become new. In Christ I am totally, fully and perfectly righteous...that's new. The old sinful me, "in Adam", has passed away. When I was "in Adam" I was a stranger to God but now "in Christ" I've been brought near.....that's new! The orphan has now been adopted ---that's new! I was once God's enemy but now I've been reconciled, that's new; the lost has been found, that's new; the slave has been bought back, that's new; the captive has been liberated and all because of the finished work of one man, Jesus Christ, who loved me and gave Himself for me! Now that's new and when the new arrived the old had to pass away. They cannot and will not co-exist. The truth is this, as a result and benefit of the gospel, I am a brand new creature in Christ. My status before God has been changed. I have a new righteousness which is totally outside of me in Christ. His righteousness is now mine and I am in Him. Although there are many new things in me and they are increasing, the place where ALL things are new is not in me, but in Christ.

And that's the Gospel Truth!